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Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada
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WEDNESDAY, *October 28th.*

THE HON. SIR JOHN COCKBURN in the chair.

At 10.30 a.m., MR. C. F. G. MASTERMAN read his paper on *The Habit of Books.* (This will appear in the January *Review*).

At 11.30 a.m., MRS. RALPH read her paper on

USEFUL HOLIDAYS.

No view of a subject could be more short-sighted and selfish than that taken of the education of their children by the type of parent who, in the "silly season," writes to the *Times* deploring the length of school holidays. The whole trend and tendency of modern life demand long school holidays, not merely, as the grudging parent of the *Times* correspondence column thinks, in the interest of the teachers, but, quite as much, in the interest of our children. Think of the hurry and rush of life, which unhappily have invaded the schoolroom as forcibly as the warehouse, and are felt even in the nursery; the haste to add one accomplishment to another 'ology, and the hurry to prepare for examinations. Think of the disintegration of family life through the removal of the father's work to a distance from the children's home, or of the children themselves to a distant school for several months of every year. On whatever aspect of the holiday question we may choose to dwell, any thoughtful unselfish parent, any true educationalist, any real child-lover must feel that on all grounds, physical, moral and spiritual, the first thing we must say about holidays is that they are indispensable. That parents and children, brothers and sisters, may have leisure to meet, to get to know one another, to get into the habitude of common occupations and interests, that they may have the chance of common memories of home, or of beautiful scenes or family adventures away from home—in short, for the promotion of true family feeling and the growth of family history, we must have holidays. Which of us has not felt in later years the power of that "Don't you remember?" of a mutual reminiscence in warming the heart, reviving our youth, and drawing closer the bonds

between us and our loved ones? It is pitiful to think of the thousands of families for whom the chances of storing up common memories are reduced to a few short weeks in every year. For their sakes, for everybody's sake, and on all highest grounds we must have holidays.

Having thus stated what to many will have seemed a truism, I add a second—that whatever other considerations we strive to give effect to, we must never forget that *holidays must be holidays* to be of their greatest use No amount of general or particular interest which may be awakened, no stores of knowledge which may be gained in them, can or will compensate our children for the loss of what the holiday stands for in the mind of the child, *i.e.*, a perfectly happy-go-lucky or go-as-you-please time, when everything in the shape of organization, even organized games or walks, not to speak of lessons or drill, shall be done with as completely as possible, and the child shall be allowed to be alone with children and with Nature a good part of every day. Of course, for the comfort of all, old and young, family discipline must be maintained, and the elemental virtues of obedience, punctuality, order, courtesy, and unselfishness must still be insisted on. This requirement, especially in the early part of every vacation, will prove a severe and bracing exercise in self-control. For the reaction from school order will be seen in a disposition to run amuck through all family rules; and the recoil from the pressure of work, and especially from the anxiety and strain of examinations, is seen in a tendency to a fretful self-indulgence or wild excitement, which, in either case, loses sight of every other person's needs, feelings, or interests The parents' fitness for their office will be seen in the sympathy, tact, and firmness with which they meet the varying and exacting moods of their children in the beginning of a holiday—the wish to do everything and go everywhere at once, alternating with a desire to do nothing at all, not even to get up in time for breakfast; wild delight at being at home again, with a ruthless disregard of the convenience of all the home people. These symptoms must all be utilised by the wise parent, without a single word of "preaching," by giving way as far as possible in non-essentials, and by insisting on essentials quietly, steadily, and tactfully.

I venture to insist that, especially for the first few days of vacation, nothing is more important than *rest and freedom*

in fresh air. And it is often difficult to induce each different child to take the kind of rest which is really best for it. The sturdy urchin, who uses his brains no more than he can help, instinctively chooses his own rest. If he is really bookish at heart, only his mental lags behind his physical development, he will immerse himself in a book of thrilling adventure; or, if he is observant, will have a hundred reasons for exploring expeditions; or will sociably look up all his friends and chums within his walking or cycling radius. It is the highly strung boys or girls, whose consciences have developed almost too early, or whose love of work or capacity for it have outgrown their physical strength, who need our individual care and sympathy. Their brains have been working at high pressure, and they will not stop working at an hour's notice, no matter how new or delightful the holiday scene may be. Indeed, the new excitement gives a fillip to the brain's action, and the body, naturally delicate and rapidly growing, responds only too readily to the desire for movement. In such cases it will, I think, be best to draw the children out about the things which have lately been absorbing them. Even if it is "talking shop," it will be best to let them talk freely about the school, the examinations and everything related to them. The excitement will gradually "talk itself out," and while impressions are vivid, and brain and tongue are restless, we shall get information about things and people which we may seek in vain at a later stage. If this talking can be done while the child's body is resting it will be all so much to the good. Somewhat later, when the inevitable lassitude sets in, when, in fact, the child's nature is so far on the road to recovering its balance that the brain has become quiescent and the body has time to feel how tired it is, then a good quiet unexciting story, preferably read aloud, or good narrative poetry read aloud, or anything which appeals to the impersonal generous emotions, may be introduced. But if holidays are to be "useful" they must be restful, and the rest must come first of all. It need not mean either vacuity or frivolity, but it must be secured.

Having said so much, however, it becomes necessary to add, that I believe most children and young people will enjoy their holidays most keenly, and will find them most restful, if one hour or so every day is given to some fixed

employment, of a kind as far as possible outside the ordinary school curriculum. The only exception to that ought to be at the child's own strong wish, if he be of an age to choose. Some school courses nowadays are so all-embracing, and the teaching is so suggestive, that many older children have ideas of their own which they want to carry out. A boy whom I knew, with all London before him, and plenty of money, told his father, at the beginning of a Christmas vacation, that he wanted above all things to study the Assyrian bas-reliefs in the basement of the British Museum. They had been made interesting to him at school. On the other hand, in many cases the school life is narrow and absorbing while it lasts, and the wise parent who cannot choose otherwise for a child, will be thankful for the holidays as opportunities to turn young thoughts into other channels. But under no circumstances ought the school to cast its shadow on the vacation in the form of "holiday tasks" or "holiday governesses," unless these latter are engaged as aids to general jollity. Nothing which suggests examination at the end, or which signifies the grasp of school upon the young life, ought to be permitted to come between the child and its feeling of release, its feeling of return to home and the life and duties of home. To stimulate that feeling, which in itself is of the highest spiritual value in the upbringing of children, I suggest that some very light housekeeping tasks be apportioned to each one, something that will require doing every day for others, and thereby help the child to believe that not only does he miss the home when he is absent, but that the home misses him; that when he is away his niche is unfilled. As to what follows there are two cautions to be given. First, I must be understood as meaning throughout that the work indicated must be done by little and little. It must never be pushed beyond the point at which it ceases to be recreation. Secondly, the holiday campaign must be carefully thought over beforehand, read about, and the books procured by the parents. The plans ought then to be stored away in their own minds, and produced day by day, a bit at a time, as the reason for that day's work. Anything like a *Swiss Family Robinson* revelation of family plans for a vacation at its beginning would simply be fatal in the case of modern children just home

from school. If the mother says, "I'm going to do so-and-so to-day, who will go with me?" ready volunteers will be found for each expedition.

Of other occupations than household duties, I rank first in importance all such as take the children into the open-air. For that reason, amongst others, I detest the making of collections. It is better, in my humble judgment, to go every day for a month to see the anemones in a rock-pool, learning to dodge the tide, and learning, too, patience, perseverance, love of beauty in its own undisturbed home, the power to be still, the power to sympathize with even the lowest forms of life, than, in our lodgings at night, to hang over a glazed tank in which we have incarcerated a few unhappy jelly fish or anemones, which we try to keep alive on minced beef! Acting on my plan we may know fewer technicalities about anemones, perhaps, but we shall be *wiser* about them and about many other things besides. In the same way an hour spent in trying to find seaweed in its own home, content to leave it there and go back again to find it, will teach us more of seaweed than a month of evenings spent in pressing, drying and labelling the specimens we might bring home. Our holidays cannot be better spent than in teaching our children sympathy for life in all its forms from the lowest to the highest, and I gravely doubt whether collections foster that sentiment. The boldest imagination falters at the idea of St. Francis of Assisi making collections! But, I repeat, we may legitimately take all the pains of the most ardent collector, and gain nearly all the knowledge of habitat and modes of life which he has, without, on our part, any interference with the liberty of bird or beast or fish. I should like to see young people as "knowing" about creatures as the man who, on being offered a handsome reward for a specimen of the large blue *columbaria*, sallied out, in a dry and thirsty region, with a phial of water in his pocket. At a point far away from towns he sat down, made a little basin with the dust, poured a little water into it and waited. Before very long the beautiful insect, almost the last of its race in this country, hovered over the water and alighted for one sip. The butterfly net was on it in an instant and it never flew again. I and all whom I could influence would have stopped short at watching the unsuspecting creature drink. A friend who has made a study of her children's

holidays keeps lists hanging on a wall so as to be easily seen and added to, of the various flowers, birds, insects, etc., seen by the young people and identified.

I have an idea that when parents are obliged to spend vacations away from home it would be well for them to go back again and again to the same neighbourhood for a series of years. For this I have several reasons. First, it would enable them to take up, year after year, with their children, several subjects in succession *on the same ground*. That very last fact would have this important bearing, that it would shew the children how varied and almost exhaustless are the interests of every spot in the British Islands. Kingsley's joy in a yard of hedge and a churchwarden pipe was not an exaggerated expression. But he had Kingsley's eyes, imagination, love of knowledge, and reverent spirit! The pipe was the only negligable factor in the case! Well, let us go, for instance, to the southern borders of Kingsley's country, to some point on the Dorset or Hampshire coast, and there, between the moorland and the sea, let us year by year take up in succession the different sciences illustrated on such a spot. The flora of the moors, of the sea, the fauna of each, the geology of the region, its fascinating archæology, its architecture (of which Christchurch Priory alone is a living textbook of several orders), its stained glass, the mere wild beauty of the moors with the heather, or the pools with the sunset colours in them, the pines with their russet-brown carpet of silence, and the sea—with all that sea and shore offer there to stir patriotism. There are a thousand points round the British Islands as full of interest and even more beautiful than that; and such a diligent search for what we might learn in them year by year would open our children's minds as they are not open now to the value and beauty of their own country. It would help our children to realize that there is a beauty and grandeur and awesomeness of the small as well as of the big, and of the sods under our feet as well as of the highest crest of the Himalayas. It would forbid that priggish and untrue feeling, "Oh, I know such-and-such a place," when, in fact, what is known is only the sands, the bathing machines, and the pier.

Then for a winter holiday, or for many holidays, I would suggest that the country round a child's own home should

be utilised in the same way. It is of all places, very often, the one least known. Let us say that during a Christmas holidays in which no skating is to be had we decide on "getting up" our own neighbourhood, somewhat on the lines suggested in my article on "Historic England" in the *Parents' Review* for September, 1902. The plan will involve, perhaps, thick shoes, short skirts, some outlay in driving to sweeten expeditions, a fine disregard of wet and cold, and courage as to taking meals out of doors even in winter if the day be dry. But if we resolve on doing this, and on making the doing of it delightful to the more grown children by every means in our power, we shall find that we have, both for ourselves and them, tapped a fountain of interest and enjoyment which will run for many years and into the most unexpected channels. If parts of many mornings were occupied in hunting up, making sketches and noting peculiarities of the historical sites, buildings and ruins within walking or driving distance of our own homes, I can imagine parts of the evenings being devoted to dressing a few tiny dolls in the costumes worn by characters who lived at the places visited, or in making with sand, or books, or anything handy, rough relief maps or plans of a neighbourhood or a battle. I remember a party of boys and girls with older friends carrying out this latter suggestion at Lynmouth, having explored the Valley of the Doones; and I can never understand why real history cannot be made as interesting to children as fiction, for, in sober truth, it is often the stranger of the two. Plenty of time must be given to each spot, more than one visit cheerfully made if necessary, every question suggested or asked must be answered, or a most painstaking effort made to answer it, every clue must be followed back and back. For if we go into the work at all, it must be done so thoroughly and conscientiously, with such humility and patience, with such an avoidance of guess-work, prejudice and slurring as shall be in itself a lesson of the highest value. And it must be done a little at a time. Two happy girls with their father gave part of every afternoon during a summer vacation to Fountains Abbey. I reiterate: we must never forget in the holidays that "Nature, the kind old nurse," is an excellent teacher; and Home is just as good. We must give the children their fling.

I have spoken in an earlier paragraph of reading aloud and I wish to recur to it. There is no more useful taste which can be fostered in children than that for sitting quietly at work, sewing, knitting, netting, painting, drawing, or what not, and being read aloud to. Or, what is often as useful in the case of growing children, lying on the grass or the carpet doing nothing and enjoying reading aloud. There is no accomplishment so useful which is so much neglected as reading aloud. The exercise of the lungs which passes for it in elementary schools is too terrible for characterisation; and in secondary schools, while the misuse of the vocal organs is not so great, neither time nor care enough is given to the teaching of the art. In the case of children who are frequently read aloud to at home, the knowledge which they gain of particular books, while in itself valuable, is the least part of the result. I think the habit of gathering as a family round a common centre, of using the hands while the brain is left free, or the habit, on the other hand, of stillness and rest of body while the mind is working lightly and easily, the delightful associations and memories that will in later years be called up by sight or sound of the books read at home—these are worth much effort to confer on our children. It goes without saying that we must not read rubbish aloud, but that in every case we must choose, of its kind, whether for older or younger children, a classic or a good translation of one.

This paper would be wholly incomplete if I did not mention one subject with many ramifications, all of which I will comprise, for the moment, under the much mis-used term—Church-work. No holiday can be usefully filled which does not include a definite effort on our part to lead our children's thoughts out to the wants of others less fortunate than themselves. Many schools now undertake to contribute regularly to some Orphanage or Mission at home or abroad. But none of us would be willing that all our children's associations with the idea of helping others should gather round the school alone. If we desire to give our children "not merely interests, but relations," surely we shall seek to make them most cordial in this sphere, in which the establishment of "relations" is of such vital necessity to our children's highest, because their spiritual, good.